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Eoin Devereux  
*University of Limerick*

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Eoin Devereux, MA, is an Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Limerick. He is also an RTE Research Fellow at the School of Communications at Dublin City University for the period 1991-1994, where he is currently completing his PhD.

# Devils and angels: the rise of Irish telethon television

Eoin Devereux

## Introduction

In this article I wish to examine the issue of how the media portray the Irish poor with particular reference to the emergence of fund-raising or telethon television. This study is part of a larger project which examines how the Irish national public service broadcasting organization, Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE), portrays poverty and the poor through an examination of fund-raising television, factual television (news, current affairs and documentaries) and fictional accounts of poverty (television drama) over a twelve month period. My project represents a significant departure from the existing debate about poverty and the media in an Irish context in that previous research<sup>1</sup> has almost exclusively focused on newspaper coverage of this question.<sup>2</sup> In this article I discuss the emergence of charity television in Ireland; the form and structure of RTE's bi-annual telethon *People in Need*; I then discuss the messages about poverty and the poor through an examination of four filmed segments<sup>3</sup> which were broadcast during the telethon in 1992; I conclude by questioning the appropriateness of media responses of this sort to problems such as poverty and need.

## Emergence of charity television in Ireland

Although particular examples of charitable activities by RTE television and radio may be found if we sift through the annals of its history<sup>4</sup>, there have been radical changes in the activities of RTE and other media organizations since the mid-1980s.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of fund-raising or telethon television represents a significant shift for RTE not only in terms of a change in programming style, but also in terms of its perceived role and function. It is perhaps no accident that telethon television has emerged at a time when the Irish State is retreating from its provider role and adopting a strict monetarist stance in relation to spending. As we will discuss later on in this paper, whether RTE as a public service broadcasting organization should be seen to shore up such activities through organizing large scale fund-raising activities with little or no reference to the causes of such problems, or should in fact be more concerned with uncovering the sources of inequality remains an important issue worthy of consideration. For our more immediate purposes however, the telethon is a new television genre to which RTE gives over a great deal of its time and resources<sup>6</sup> on a bi-annual basis, and in doing so is forced to acknowledge repeatedly over a period of usually twelve to fourteen hours that inequality and poverty exists in Irish society.

The telethon is different from other television genres in a number of respects: (1) it marks the entry of contemporary television into a fund-raising role; (2) it involves the suspension of normal television programming; (3) it is particularly lengthy, usually taking on a 'marathon' format; (4) it involves the participation of well known personalities from the worlds of entertainment, politics and sport; (5) it has a significant amount of audience participation in terms of both the audience as fund-raisers and as subscribers; (6) it offers the opportunity (theoretically at any rate) to gain a greater insight into the world of the poor through the use of filmed segments and interviews; (7) it does not attempt to challenge the status quo, and proffers the notion that charitable solutions are the answers to social problems such as poverty and unemployment; (8) it places great emphasis on the (heroic and sometimes unusual) activities of individuals, groups and communities who have raised moneys for 'good causes'.

1. The only exception to this rule is Horgan's 1987 study of Irish media coverage of African poverty.

2. See Gibbons, 1984; Kelly, 1984 and Ruddy, 1987.

3. These segments were edited from the programme and viewed five times. The content of these filmed segments were transcribed onto cards noting the verbal and visual messages and the use of particular production techniques such as incidental music or filming in slow motion or real time.

4. RTE's pop music channel 2FM for example organises the collection of non perishable goods at Christmas time for the 'poor and needy' in conjunction with The Lion's Club of Ireland. Gay Byrne's radio programme has also of course had a long history of locating and donating household items such as fridges and washing machines to the less well off.

5. See for example Greg Philo's essay 'From Buerk to Band Aid: the media and the 1984 Ethiopian Famine' in Eldridge, (eds.) 1993. For a discussion on production approaches to TV telethons see 'Telethons' by Arthur Forrest, (1987).

6. The 1992 *People in Need* Telethon cost RTE £250,000 to stage. Source: Correspondence between the author and the programme's executive producer.

In a brief but very useful critique of the emergence of telethon television in a British context, Peter Golding notes the paradox which is involved in this type of television programming.

The paradox for the government is that in unleashing the charitable tiger it has barely held on to its tail. The land is alight with stark and forceful images of homelessness, child abuse, the old, the sick and the lonely as the iconographers of plenty have been let loose on the underside of Thatcherite Britain (Golding, 1991:51).

Paradoxically, Golding notes that despite all the coverage given to the poor on these television spectaculars, the actual amount which the public are giving to charity has in fact decreased from £1.97 per month in 1990 to £1.28 per month in 1991. With the exception of recent work by Ruddle and O'Connor (1993) there is in fact very little known about charity trends in Ireland. A pertinent question for future research to ask might be whether existing charities have been affected by new fund-raising of the telethon kind.

We can trace the development of telethon television back to the early 1980s. Elayne Rapping (1983) for example notes in an American context that in excess of sixty television stations around the US had by 1983 devoted some of their prime time slots to 'Job-A-Thons'.<sup>7</sup> The 1985 'Live Aid' fund-raising concert however represents a major shift in the media's role and relationship towards poverty and inequality. Seen worldwide by millions of viewers, this spectacular televised rock concert raised millions of pounds for the starving and destitute of the developing world. For a very brief period of time it focused the developed world's attention on African poverty and inequality, although its critics were quick to point out the contradictory images of millionaire conscience stricken rock stars telling their audience to give to the African poor, of whom we were given only occasional glimpses, throughout the event. The dominant messages of 'Live Aid' were: (1) existing political structures both in the developed and developing worlds have failed the starving and poor of Africa; (2) charity represents a (short-term) solution to these problems; (3) the communications industry, whether it be through the record/music business or through television, radio and newspapers have a role to play in attempting to alleviate poverty and inequality through fund-raising.

Given the amount of media attention dedicated to this event and the central role played by an Irishman (Bob Geldof) in initiating both the Band Aid organization and the 'Live Aid' concert, it is not surprising that RTE gave this concert its full support. Perhaps more importantly for our purposes, is the fact that the format adopted by 'Live Aid' was to be used as a mechanism by RTE and other media organizations in the new fund-raising role in which they found themselves. In Britain 'Comic Relief' and 'Children in Need' have emerged as an annual feature on television, whilst in Ireland, 'Live Aid' was to be followed up by three home based telethons; 'Self Aid' in 1986 which was directed at solving unemployment; 'A Light in the Dark' in 1992 to raise funds for the starving of Somalia, and 'People in Need' which had a broader focus on disadvantaged groups in 1988, 1990 and 1992.

The 'People in Need' telethon is organized by RTE in conjunction with the 'People in Need' Trust which was established in 1988. According to its chairman Dr. P. J. Moriarty, the trust has the objective of '...raising money on a national scale for the smaller and lesser known charitable organizations which, for one reason or another, were unable to raise sufficient funds for themselves.' In May 1992, the third 'People in Need' telethon on RTE television raised £2 million which was distributed to 644 organizations in the Republic of Ireland, including those providing services for the handicapped, the homeless, the elderly and deprived children. The telethon idea has not been without its critics however. During the broadcast of the programme upon which this paper is based, a group of unemployed people picketed the gates of RTE protesting against the idea that charitable solutions were the answers to serious social problems such as unemployment and poverty.<sup>8</sup> Added to this, were further criticisms of the event from the broadcaster

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7. The emergence of the Job-A-Thon concept is discussed in Cross Currents in Channels (May-June) 1983.

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8. See for example print media coverage of this event in 'Stick Your Charity - Jobless lash Telethon Bash' by Joe O'Shea in *The Star* 6 May 1992 and 'Protest Plans over Telethon Fundraiser' letter from Thomas McDonnell of the Portobello Unemployed Action Group to the *Irish Press* 5 May 1992.

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and champion of the rights of the disabled, Donal Toolan. In an interview between Toolan and Joe Duffy during the 1992 Telethon programme, Toolan criticized telethon television. Liking the telethon to Christmas, he said that '...the people who give most at Christmas, are the people who need most. People with disabilities aren't terribly happy with the notion of fund-raising as a mechanism of solving what are political issues' adding that we should realise that the telethon '... is not going to solve the poverty issue in this country'.

### **C'mon Everybody? People in need 1992: form and structure**

The 1992 'People in Need' telethon was broadcast by RTE 1 and Network 2 on 8 May. Lasting over twelve hours it raised £2 million for Irish charities. For several weeks beforehand, the programme's advertising campaign was heavily featured in RTE's advertising schedules. Having adopted Eddie Cochran's rock and roll classic song 'C'mon Everybody' as its anthem, the campaign encouraged 'everybody' to get involved in no matter how small a way in the telethon's events. The advertising campaign featured familiar faces from RTE's radio and television networks and suggested to the viewers to organize fund-raising events in their localities, workplaces or schools. The telethon was promoted therefore by an advertising strategy which gave the impression of being inclusive. The notion of involving 'everybody' is patently at odds with the very reason why the telethon might be deemed to be necessary in the first place, namely that there are groups of people who are poor by being both materially deprived and socially excluded.

In terms of the form and structure of the programme itself, the 1992 'People in Need' telethon had three distinct features: (1) a major part of the programme was based in the main RTE television studio, where audience members could ring in to a group of celebrity telephonists and pledge money for the telethon's fund; (2) the programme had a series of links with other celebrities at various locations throughout the country who reported on the fund-raising activities in the region from which they were reporting; (3) the programme also featured a number of filmed segments of people who were in need of charity.

The studio based part of the telethon featured an auction of otherwise expensive household goods for which viewers could pledge money. Sponsorship by native and multinational companies played a central role in the make up of the programme, thus offering us the message that the business sector were doing their bit for charity. Throughout the programme we were reminded of three things; (1) we (the Irish) are a great nation of givers; (2) the money pledged was going to 'good causes', or in other words only to those who deserve our assistance or charity; (3) the donations made were guaranteed to be given to groups at work in the area/region in which the donors live. The links to the telethon studio from the outside broadcast units throughout the country again underpinned this notion that the Irish are 'great' when it comes to giving to deserving causes. Given the fund-raising function of the programme, there was perhaps understandably a great deal of attention on how much money had in fact been pledged by the viewers. Thus the programme was interspersed with accounts of how much the latest tally amounted to, reaching a crescendo when £2 million pounds had finally been reached.<sup>9</sup>

The outside broadcast links featured individuals and communities involved in spectacular, heroic or unusual events. Schoolchildren raised money by paying to be allowed to come to school in casual clothes: in another instance a man bungi-jumped on a bicycle. Invariably, when companies sponsored a particular event or were simply making a donation to the telethon fund, they would present the programme reporter with a cheque exaggerated in its physical size, emblazoned with the company logo, thus availing of free advertising on the national airwaves.

The third, and for our purposes most interesting, feature of the form and structure of the telethon was the fact that the programme featured nine filmed segments of groups

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9. Diana Leat in a critique of British Telethon Television has noted 'Rolling scoreboards emblazoned in light, cheers at every further thousand pounds, do little to foster awareness that the amount of money raised is merely a means to and not the end of the exercise'. Leat, (1990:148).

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and individuals who needed our help. Given the marathon length of the telethon, the segments themselves, taken together, lasted a mere eleven minutes and four seconds, and even allowing for the fact that a number of them were repeated twice during the telethon, it is clear that the programme's primary function was to focus on the activities of the helpers of the 'deserving' and not on the 'deserving' themselves. Just who the programme makers chose as examples of people in need and how their story was told is perhaps of more fundamental importance. It is the deserving poor who get most attention in these segments and even where groups who might otherwise be demonized such as the young homeless, the young unemployed and the long term unemployed are given coverage, they are portrayed as the deserving poor because the examples used are those of the homeless and unemployed who are doing something about their situation with the help of the subscribers to 'People in Need'. Those segments fitting neatly into the 'deserving' poor category were ones which dealt with a child abuse programme (1:57); the mentally handicapped (1:57); the physically handicapped (1:28); autism (1:30); the elderly (1:28); cancer care (1:30). In the remaining three segments which dealt with a youth unemployment project (1:25); the personal experience of unemployment (1:27) and a centre for homeless boys with drug addiction problems (1:57), the stories dealt with groups and individuals who are often rejected as the undeserving poor. Yet in all three cases the segments again featured those who were doing something about their situation and thus deserving of our help. In all but one of the nine appeals shown throughout the telethon, the filmed segments featured what I have referred to earlier in this study as the agents of the poor. A great deal of time was given over to those who are working either on a professional or voluntary basis for the poor or needy. Given the specific fund-raising function of these pieces of film, an identifiable set of production techniques were used by the programme makers, ranging from using 'appropriate' background music and songs with relevant lyrics, to using different styles of filming. Those who are the agents of the poor are shot speaking to camera in real time, whilst the poor themselves are shot in real time, in silhouette, and in the particular case of those suffering from a mental or physical handicap in slow motion. In the following section I examine in greater detail the messages of four of these nine filmed segments. I have chosen to examine the three pieces of film that make appeals on behalf of those who might otherwise be considered to be examples of the 'Devil's Poor' and I contrast these pieces with the content of an appeal on behalf of an example of the deserving or 'God's Poor'<sup>10</sup>. Each segment is considered in terms of their visual and verbal messages and the production techniques employed by the programme makers.

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10. The typology being used here follows that used by Golding and Middleton (1982) in their study of the British print media in *Images of Welfare*.

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## Good boys and slaves: four segments considered

### Case (1) The centre for homeless boys

This piece of film lasting one minute fifty seven seconds was an appeal on behalf of a centre in Cork city which works with homeless boys, many of whom have addiction problems or have been imprisoned. In terms of production style, the segment used slow mournful music to emphasize the desperation of their lives. The visual imagery was composed of shots of a hooded male breaking into a car, a male youth sleeping rough and another with empty spirits bottles sleeping rough on a park bench. Later on, we were to see a male youth sniffing glue and another shot of a homeless boy sleeping rough. These images were in stark contrast to others used in the film which featured the centre itself, those working with the youths and shots of these youths engaged in activities in carpentry and metal workshops, a bakery and in a residential treatment centre. Other images were of a young man speaking to camera in silhouette of his drug addiction and of the centre's director appealing for funds. The verbal messages of this piece of film are also interesting; mixing as they do the philosophy of the centre, the experiences of these youths in relation to drugs and drug abuse and the appeal for funds. The dominant verbal messages of this piece stressed the Christian ethos of the

centre: 'We don't regard them as good or bad, because there is no such thing as a good or a bad boy. We are all brothers and sisters of Christ. He will probably never be a professor, but he will be a tradesman' (the centre's founder); the dangers of drugs: 'There was a fellah up in The Glen, he was sniffin' out of a barrel and he fell asleep like and his friends ran away and he never woke up' (young boy speaking to camera); and the need for funds: 'We're desperate for money. We have a very simple vision. Young people should not die because of alcohol and drug addiction' (centre's director).

This piece of film is of interest in that it shows examples of activities (albeit set up for the purposes of filming) not normally seen on television such as glue sniffing, car stealing, and youths sleeping rough. It is also of interest in that it contains images on the one hand of those who might be considered to be the 'Devil's Poor' engaging in 'deviant' or 'anti-social' activity. They are however later rescued from such a categorization by being seen to have reformed from problems such as drug abuse and by being busy and industrious in the centre's workshops and bakery. Thus by the end of this short film the 'Devil's Poor' have become transformed into 'God's Poor' deserving of our charity and sympathy.

### **Case (2) The personal experience of unemployment**

This piece of film was one of two which dealt with the experiences of the unemployed. Lasting just one minute twenty seven seconds, the segment told the story of the personal experience of one unemployed man who was involved with a resource centre for the unemployed. The segment used a song by folk singer Dolores Keane 'The Cotton Mill' which is about the impact of de-industrialization in a small town. Visually, the film consisted of images of dereliction in a post-industrial landscape, showing a disused railway line, broken down factory buildings. They also featured the unemployed man upon whose experience the piece was based, showing him at the unemployment resource centre, looking into shop windows at items he cannot afford to buy. These images were supplemented by others of the activities of the unemployment resource centre shot in slow motion. Visually then, the messages of this film segment were those of dereliction as a result of the decline of industry, the exclusion of the poor from being able to participate in a consumer society, but also of the deserving poor who are actively doing something about their plight through self-help activities.

Verbally, the messages of this segment emphasize the notion of the 'dignity of labour', the willingness of this man to engage in 'workfare', the broader threat of unemployment to others and the important work being done by resource centres such as that featured in the film. The man featured in this piece states at the outset that unemployment is an unhealthy situation to be in and goes on to say that 'It's not about money...with me I'm willing to work even for the money I collect on the dole'. It is, he tells us '...unhealthy for me not to be working. I'm a healthier happier person when I'm working'. The exclusion which the unemployed experience not being able to fully participate in a consumer based society is also stressed. 'Even when I walk down the street, I don't look into shop windows, there is no point. I'm never going to be able to purchase what's in the window'. The important self-help work of this and other centres is also emphasized. These centres help build self-esteem and self-worth in contrast to the dole which takes self-respect away from you.

This filmed segment has as well as its fund-raising function a number of other important messages. It uses a clear example of a member of the deserving poor to articulate a story about the experience of unemployment. It stresses the dignity of labour as well as making it very certain that this man is not work shy or scrounging from the system. The fund-raising appeal function of this piece of film is structured around the activities of the unemployed who are seen to be doing something about their situation by attending classes and developing their skills, thus like the deserving poor of the homeless youths film discussed above, these people are deserving of our charity and help.

**Case (3) Youth unemployment project**

The film sequence which featured this Dublin based training project for the young unemployed was one minute twenty five seconds in length. In attempting to get a set of messages across to the telethon audience, it used a soundtrack which featured the music of Galway rock band The Stunning singing 'Brewing Up A Storm'. The song's lyrics replete with social realism – 'Honey if the truth hurts, don't look away, it's easy to pretend that life is a rosy bouquet' – as well as its chorus 'Brewing Up A Storm (repeated)' was used to underpin the messages of this film segment. Visually, the film contained scenes of dereliction, boarded up flats, graffitied doors and walls suggesting perhaps that this community has been both abandoned by some of its own members and by the state. The images however quickly shift to show the viewers, unemployed youths who are busy and productive in a workshop setting. These shots then lead to some action footage where a hovercraft and a wind-surfer built by these youths are being driven along a beach at high speed. The final image is of a young boy appealing to the audience for funds for their project.

Verbally, the segment sends out three messages, the need for funding, the lack of resources in communities where there is a high dependency on social welfare and the importance of projects like the one featured in the face of problems such as drug addiction and despair. The project's organizer alerts us to these issues in his interview. He says '...in an area like this, where there is nearly eighty per cent unemployment...the bulk of families live on social welfare as their main source of income. The kind of resources wouldn't be available in the community to allow the kids to experience these kinds of things' and 'Young people drift into the drugs scene through a sense of hopelessness, and again, projects like this can offer some chance that life isn't just a drab'.

**Case (4) A centre for autism**

This film segment lasting one minute thirty seconds was one of three segments which dealt with mental and physical handicap. All three invoked similar production techniques and images using appropriate music, showing those with mental and physical handicap in heroic poses but always shot in slow motion whilst their agents were filmed in 'real time' explaining their work and appealing for money.

The appeal used a soundtrack consisting of Mary Black's song 'No Frontiers' suggesting perhaps the unlimited possibilities for these young autistics if funding (charity?) was made available. Visually, the piece consisted of a series of images of the centre's director explaining autism to a collection of images of the centre's clients. All of the ten shots of the autistic youths were shot in slow motion showing them in a variety of poses from working in the centre's garden, feeding animals, and active in the centre's workshops. The technique of using slow motion shots in this segment as well as the other segments which dealt with the physically and mentally handicapped is an attempt at creating a sense of pathos, appealing to the audience on an emotional level. In line with the arguments made earlier about the portrayal of the unemployed and homeless youths as 'doers', deserving of our charity and sympathy, a similar set of techniques were adopted in portraying the autistic youths shown in this film. The audience were therefore offered images of these youths engaged in a variety of activities against all the odds stacked against them.

Verbally, the piece contained a more hard hitting series of messages. The centre's director in speaking to camera asserted that '...the more handicapped people in Ireland are, the more deprived they are of rights' adding that '...young people with autism are the slaves of the twentieth century – they are forced to comply, they have no rights of their own. They are stripped of their dignity. They have no funds of their own. They are disenfranchised, and unless we start giving them that dignity back, we are doing nothing for our people'.

## Discussion

Telethon television is a hybrid form of programming which is intertextual in make up combining as it does many different types of television programme such as the game show, quiz, and popular music programme. From a semiotician's point of view there exists a wide range of often contradictory symbols and messages about those who are poor and in need.<sup>11</sup> Taken as a whole, the particular programme which I have discussed here is replete with contradictory images and messages about poverty and need. We see images of de-industrialization and the retreat of capital mixed with images of companies offering cheques to alleviate need. More often than not the focus is on those who are helping the needy either as helpers/representatives or as donors to the collection. To vary somewhat Golding and Middleton's (1982) delineation between God's and the Devil's poor, what in practice we see are the Angels who help those who are deemed to be needy and very little of the Devil's or undeserving poor. As mentioned earlier even those who might in the minds of the general public be a 'threat' undergo a quick catharsis and become examples of those who are worthy of our charity.

Those who consider themselves to be pragmatists or those of a consensus oriented political persuasion might suggest that I have read too much into the meaning of telethon television. They might argue for instance that: (a) the telethon is after all better than nothing, and (b) the filmed segments only serve to convince the audience to put their hands into their pockets to give to people who are deserving of our assistance. I do not doubt the good will of (most) audience members for a second, but I believe firmly that there are a number of serious issues to be addressed in relation to this form of television programming. There is first of all the question of the entry of a public service television station into the field of fund-raising and charitable activities. One might question the appropriateness of the media mopping up the poverty mess which the failure of other state agencies has caused. One might also ask whose interests does this kind of activity serve. The public in general including poor people? Does it serve more particularly the interests of the status quo? Would it not be better for television to spend an equivalent amount of time in looking at the real causes of such poverty problems?

At best telethon television offers a mere twelve hours of attention every two years to only some poor people. In another context Elihu Katz (1980) writes of the sense of occasion during media coverage of events. This is particularly true of the telethon where audience members are encouraged to participate directly in the making of the programme. But whilst 'everybody' as the programme's slogan suggests is encouraged to be involved, the reality is that those who cannot afford to give are excluded.

There are also specific ideological issues to be addressed. In this paper I have argued that there are dominant sets of messages emanating from the telethon: (1) television has a role to play in helping to solve social problems – the causes of such problems are however ignored; (2) charity is seen as desirable and feasible in terms of the solution of poverty problems; (3) capitalism is okay and individual companies and multi-national corporations have a role to play in either offering sponsorship or donations; no reference is made to poor pay, working conditions or tax avoidance for example, all of which either directly or indirectly can be responsible for inequality and poverty; (4) as a rule we only ever see God's or the Deserving Poor – in only one instance out of nine do we observe the Devil's or Undeserving Poor, but as I have argued above, these poor people whom we might otherwise dismiss become quickly transformed into those deserving of our help and charity. This form of television therefore perpetuates the notion that there are two types of poor. The audience are served the myth that charity is the correct answer to poverty and that the Deserving Poor are the ones to whom we should direct our attention. The opposite is also true in that by defining who the 'real needy' are the remaining poor are not only ignored but also further demonized and excluded. These myths<sup>12</sup> therefore serve to underpin the status quo and are comforting for both the social and political systems and some audience members. By far the most disturbing dimension to this form of television is the collective sense of denial that both the programme presenters, reporters, participants and the audience enter into by holding

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11. For another example of this approach, see Benthall (1993).

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12. For a full discussion on the functions of myth see Breen and Corcoran, 1982.

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onto the comforting notion that charity is the answer to poverty. Writing in an American context, Elayne Rapping (1983) has correctly described this type of television as a form of black comedy, where despite the seriousness of the problems lurking 'out there' in the real world of poverty and unemployment, broadcasters and audience members collude with each other to believe that charitable solutions are both feasible and desirable. This is particularly true in an Irish context. Marathon television programmes have in reality little to offer by way of solutions to the 300,000 unemployed or the one million poor.

*Note:* This article is based on a seminar which I gave as a visiting lecturer at the Centre Universitaire d'Etudes Irlandais de Paris, Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle. Institut du Monde Anglophone in May 1993. I wish to thank the Erasmus organization for their support.

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